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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district assessments rests on a fundamental belief: all children can learn. This belief centers on all children who receive educational services, even those whose teachers and therapists work with them at home or in the hospital. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the rationale for holding schools accountable for the progress of every student toward challenging educational standards and to describe the assessment options for measuring this progress through state and district assessment systems. (Contains 16 references and 1 table.) (GCP)

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Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in State and District Assessments

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Chapter 12
Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in State and District Assessments

Martha L. Thurlow & Sandra J. Thompson

The inclusion of students with disabilities in state and district assessments rests on a fundamental belief: *All children can learn.* This belief is not about *almost* all children, or all children *except* the ones in the special education classroom. It is about every single child who receives educational services, even those whose teachers and therapists work with them at home or in the hospital.

A statement directly related to the belief that all children can learn is *All children have the right to work toward challenging educational standards.* Think about the children with whom you have worked. It may be easy to think about Tanya, the girl who just won the state geography contest. It is also possible to assume that the statement applies to Eric, who does not read very well because of a learning disability; we can recognize that by using a scanner and books on tape, he is also working toward standards at grade level. What about Mary, an eighth grader who is nonverbal, requires extensive physical care, and never leaves the special education room?

It is possible to have challenging expectations for Mary, just as for Tanya and Eric. And they all can work toward the same standards. These premises form the basic assumptions of two important federal laws: Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the rationale for holding schools accountable for the progress of every student toward challenging educational standards and to describe the assessment options for measuring this progress through state and district assessment systems.

To measure how well children are making progress toward standards, it makes sense to measure that progress through an assessment system that is aligned with the standards. According to Title I, all students in every school must be held to these standards, and the

progress of all students must be measured and reported to the public. Students with disabilities are specifically included in the definition of *all* in Title I. Based on assessment reports, schools need to make instructional and structural changes so that the expectations for all students are raised, and all children have opportunities to work toward challenging standards.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L.107–110 (2001)

"Such assessments shall . . . provide for the reasonable adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities (as defined under section 602[3] of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), necessary to measure the achievement of such students relative to State academic content and State academic achievement standards." (Sec. 1111 [3] [C][ix][II]).

The amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 also focus state and district attention on full participation of students with disabilities in assessment systems.

Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, P.L. 105-17 (1997)

"Children with disabilities are included in general State and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations, where necessary. As appropriate, the State or local educational agency develops guidelines for the participation of children with disabilities in alternate assessments for those children who cannot participate in State and district-wide assessment programs." (Sec. 612 [a] [18] [A] [i]).

State Response to Federal Requirements

For the past 10 years, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has been surveying state directors of special education about the participation of students with disabilities in education reform, with a focus on participation in state assessments and accountability systems. We completed our most recent survey in 2001 (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). In our survey of all 50 states, we found that more than half of them reported an increase over previous years in the state test participation rates of students with disabilities. Several state directors indicated that this increase was due to the following factors:

- directions given to professionals in the field
- increased awareness of and compliance with the law
- public awareness of new statewide alternate assessments
- provision of more flexible testing accommodations

Directors from about one fourth of the states reported that the performance levels of students with disabilities on state tests had increased. For example, in the state of New York, more students with disabilities passed the regents exams in 2001 than had even participated in the exams in previous years (New York State Education Department, 2001).

Assessment Options

Even though all students are expected to participate in a state's assessment system, it is not possible to assess all students in exactly the same way. Sometimes individual students need individual approaches to assessment in order to show what they know and are able to do. Most states and districts have defined the following options for students to participate in the assessment system:

- in the same way as the majority of students
- with accommodations
- in an alternate assessment

Variations of these three approaches are used in some states. Most of these, like taking tests with nonapproved accommodations (Thurlow & Wiener, 2000) or taking tests designed for lower grade levels out-of-level testing (Thurlow, Elliott, … Ysseldyke, 1999) are controversial.

Estimates of the percentages of students expected to participate in assessments in these different ways have been fairly consistent. About 85 percent of students with disabilities have relatively mild or moderate

disabilities and can participate in state and district large-scale assessments, either with or without accommodations (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, McGrew, & Shriner, 1994). These percentages are provided to give state and district administrators an idea about the rates they might expect; they are not meant to be caps or cutoff points. It has been suggested that decision makers start from the premise that most students with disabilities will participate in general assessments, with or without accommodations, rather than in alternate assessments (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 1998).

Accommodated Assessments

Assessment accommodations are alterations in the way a test is administered; they should not change the content of the test or the performance standard. The purpose of accommodations is to ensure that the student's knowledge and skills are assessed, rather than the student's disability. Researchers argue that accommodations should boost the performance of students who need them and not affect the performance of students who do not need them (Fuchs, Fuchs, Eaton, Hamlett, & Karns, 2000; Tindal, Helwig, & Hollenbeck, 1999). Thus, assessment accommodations are provided to level the playing field for students who need them, not to give those students an advantage over other students.

Currently, every state has a policy governing the use of accommodations on large-scale assessments. These policies vary widely across states, with a great range in both the number of students using accommodations and the variety of accommodations selected (Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Robey, 2002). Nearly 60 percent of all states now keep track of accommodation use during state assessments (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). It appears that the use of accommodations is either increasing or remaining stable about half of the states reported an increase in use, and the other half reported stable use. Some directors attributed growth in use to increased awareness and understanding by educators, parents, and students. (To find out more about how students across the United States are using assessment accommodations, go to the NCEO website: www.education.umn.edu/nceo.)

There are six types of assessment accommodations: setting, presentation, timing, response, scheduling, and other. Here is a brief description of each of these categories as they are described in several NCEO publications:

Setting accommodations change the location in which an assessment is given or the conditions of the assessment setting. For example, if a student has a hard time focusing attention in a group setting, or needs to take frequent breaks, he or she could request to take a test in a different room, either alone or in a small group. A student may also need an individualized setting if he or she uses special equipment, such as a tape recorder. Changes in setting could include special lighting, altered acoustics, or adapted furniture.

Timing accommodations change the allowable length of testing time and may also change the way that time is organized. This type of accommodation is most helpful if a student needs extra time to process written text, extra time to write, or time to use certain equipment. Students may also need frequent or extended breaks.

Scheduling accommodations change the particular time of day, day of the week, or number of days over which a test is administered. A student's medication or ability to stay alert for a test may require a request for these changes.

Presentation accommodations change the way a student takes a test and include changes in test format or procedures and the use of assistive devices. Some of these accommodations are controversial, especially in the area of having tests read aloud.

Response accommodations change how a student might respond to an assessment. As with presentation accommodations, these changes may include format alterations (such as marking responses in the test booklet rather than on a separate page), procedural changes (such as giving a response in a different mode pointing, oral response, or sign language, for example), and the use of assistive devices (such as use of a scribe to write student responses or a calculator, a brailler, or other communication device).

Other accommodations include things like reminding students to stay on task or offering incentives to encourage students to do their best.

Table 1 shows several examples of accommodations and decision making questions to ask students. A good resource for specific strategies for selecting and using assessment accommodations is the Council for Exceptional Children's toolkit for educators, called *Making Assessment Accommodations* (ASPIIRE/ILIAD IDEA Partnership Projects, 2000).

Table 1. Examples of Accommodations and Decision-Making Questions

Examples of Accommodation	Questions to Ask a Student
Setting	
• Administer the test in a small group or individually in a separate location with minimal distractions. • Provide special lighting. • Provide special furniture or acoustics.	• Can you focus on your own work in a room with other students? • Do you distract other students? • Can you take a test in the same way as it is given to other students?
Timing	
• Allow a flexible schedule. • Extend the time allotted to take the test. • Allow frequent breaks during testing.	• Can you work continuously for the entire length of a typically administered portion of the test (e.g., 20 to 30 minutes)? • Do you use accommodations that require more time to complete test items?
Scheduling	
• Administer the test in several sessions, possibly over several days, specifying the duration of each session. • Allow subtests to be taken in a different order. • Administer the test at different times of day.	• Do you take medication that slows you down, with optimal performance at a certain time of day? • Does your anxiety level increase dramatically when working in certain content areas, so that these should be taken after other content areas?
Presentation	
• Provide the test on audiotape. • Increase spacing between items or reduce items per page or line. • Highlight key words or phrases in directions. • Provide cues (e.g., arrows and stop signs) on answer form.	• Can you listen to and follow oral directions? • Can you see and hear? • Can you read printed text?
Response	
• Allow marking of answers in booklet. • Tape record responses for later translation. • Allow use of scribe. • Provide copying assistance between drafts.	• Can you track from a test booklet to a test response form? • Can you use a pencil or other writing tool?
Other	
• Allow special test preparation. • Use on-task/focusing prompts. • Allow any accommodation that a student needs that does not fit under the existing categories.	• Is this the first time that you will be taking a district or state assessment? • Do you have the necessary test-taking skills?

Adapted from Elliott, J., Thurlow, M., Ysseldyke, J., & Erickson, R. (1997). Providing assessment accommodations for students with disabilities in state and district assessments (Policy Directions No. 7). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. Retrieved September 2001, from the World Wide Web: http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Policy7.html

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Everyone on a student's IEP team needs enough information about assessment participation and accommodations to help a student make good decisions. Some IEP team members may encourage a student to use too many accommodations, while keeping their fingers crossed that *something* will help. Students should try out a variety of accommodations in the classroom and, with the teacher, figure out what works best before the IEP team makes decisions about which ones the student should use on high-stakes tests.

Some students have had limited experience expressing personal preferences and advocating for themselves. Speaking out about their preferences, particularly in the presence of authority figures, may be a new role for students, one for which they need guidance and feedback. Winnelle Carpenter, an educational consultant who prepares students with learning disabilities for high-stakes graduation tests, describes the process of self-advocacy as follows:

> For students with disabilities to self advocate effectively, they must understand their specific disability; learn their strengths and challenges; identify factors that are interfering with their performance, learning, and employment; and develop compensations, accommodations, and coping skills to help them succeed. In addition, through careful guidance, these same students must learn how to apply this knowledge effectively when making decisions, negotiating and speaking up on their own behalf. (Carpenter, 1995, p. iv)

The goal is for students to assume control, with appropriate levels of support, over their assessment participation and to select and use accommodations that are most helpful to them on assessments, throughout their daily lives, and in their plans for a successful transition to adult life.

NCEO interviewed nearly 100 high school students with disabilities about their participation in a large-scale state test that they must pass in order to graduate from high school (Thompson, Thurlow, & Walz, 2001). We wanted to know whether the students had participated in the statewide assessments and whether they knew their success on the tests. We also asked the students what accommodations they used on the state test and in their daily classes, and what accommodations they thought might be most helpful to them in their adult lives. We found that most students knew whether they had participated in testing and how well they did on the tests. About 75

percent of the students said that they had used accommodations on the tests. Older students were more likely to use assessment accommodations than younger students, and the majority of students used three or fewer accommodations. Extended time, testing in a separate room in a small group, having directions repeated, and reviewing test directions in advance were the accommodations used most often.

Alternate Assessment Participation

IDEA 1997 now requires all states to have alternate assessments in place, meaning they are developed and implemented, and the data are reported. An alternate assessment is a way to measure the performance of students who are unable to participate in general large-scale assessments used by a district or state. Alternate assessments provide a mechanism for students with significant disabilities to be included in the assessment system.

Our survey results from all 50 states tell us that nearly all state alternate assessments assess the same standards as general assessments either by expanding state academic content standards, linking a set of functional skills back to standards, or assessing standards plus an additional set of functional skills (Thompson ... Thurlow, 2001). We have seen the alignment of alternate assessments with standards evolve a great deal, especially over the past four years. Several states that in 1999 indicated they were developing alternate assessments based on a special education curriculum are now making a connection between their alternate assessments and state academic content standards. Several strategies have been used to show progress toward academic content standards through alternate assessments. More than half of the 50 states organize the data collected for a student's alternate assessment into some type of portfolio, while others summarize the results on a checklist or rating scale.

Many states have expanded their academic content standards to include functional skills, known in different states as basic, access, essential, or fundamental skills. Selecting performance indicators that are clearly aligned with standards is critical to the inclusion of alternate assessment participants in standards-based reform. For example, one state has this geometry standard: "The student will apply the properties of geometric shapes and spatial sense to connect geometry with problem-solving situations." There are several skills or performance indicators an alternate assessment participant could master to show progress

toward this standard. Here are a few:

- Touch a switch to turn on a stereo.
- Open a can using an electric can opener.
- Stock shelves at a grocery store.
- Determine if personal wheelchair will fit through a space.
- Recognize or identify safety symbols.

In their book *Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities* (2001), Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, and Ysseldyke acknowledge that some educators question whether these skills sufficiently represent "properties of geometric shapes and spatial sense," and some may see these connections as quite a stretch. The bottom line, however, is that all students gain from an understanding of geometric shapes and spatial sense to solve problems, achieve independence, and make contributions in their home, workplace, and community. Here are examples of two students we might expect to participate in alternate assessments:

Travis is a nine-year-old student who is cognitively impaired and uses a wheelchair. He has an intro talker that hasn't been used much. His communication is very limited. He is using a small amount of sign language. He sometimes recognizes the letter *T* for his first name but doesn't do this consistently. Due to his nonverbal communication, it is difficult to tell what he knows in math. He can bang on the keyboard of a computer but is currently working on matching the letters from the monitor screen to the keyboard.

Mandy is currently tube fed; suction is required periodically during the day, and oxygen is kept close by with an emergency medical plan in place. She has a regressive genetic disorder and attends school three days per week. Mandy uses a wheelchair. Her goals include maintaining a level of alertness (that is, awake versus sleep, seizure, or semi-responsive) maintaining her weight, and increasing her level of tolerance for range of motion.

Are some students too low functioning to participate in alternate assessments? Think back to the beginning of this chapter when we talked about the students in the "special" classroom—the students who are still learning to chew and swallow food. How could eating be related to an academic standard? Clearly, there are choices involved in eating

a meal. Making choices requires communication skills, whether to request a particular drink, choose between two vegetables, or spit out an undesired item. Is the student learning to use any assistive technology for eating? Many states have standards in tools and technology that a student might be working toward. By thinking through what *success* means for each student, the connection between content standards and the learning that students need in order to be successful is clarified. The laws and guidance previously presented make it clear that the educational progress of every child who receives educational services must be assessed.

Assessment Decisions

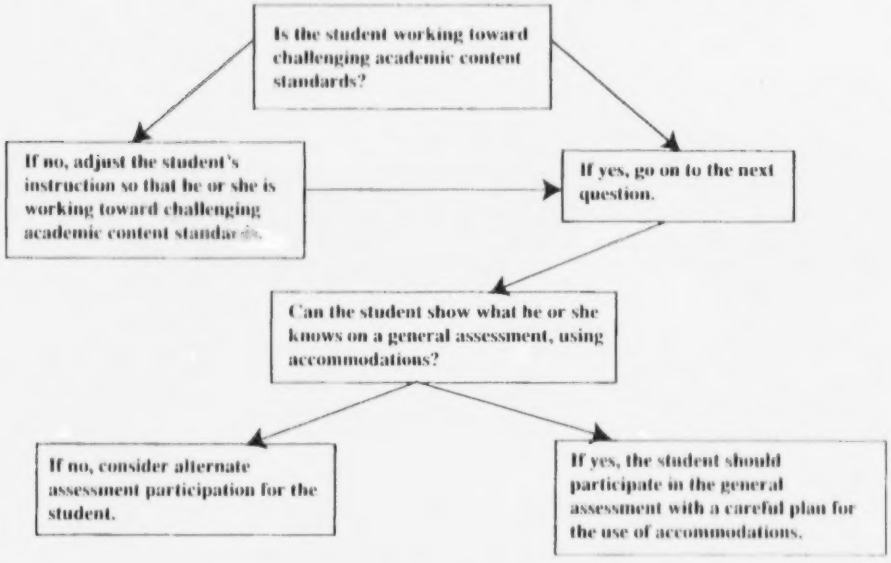
All members of a student's IEP team need to be clear about the fact that they are not to consider whether a student will participate in assessments, but how that participation might take place. The IEP team must determine whether a student with disabilities receiving special education services will participate in assessments under standardized conditions, with or without accommodations, or will participate in alternate assessments. This is an important responsibility and involves more than just a simple checkmark on an IEP form. Each IEP team member needs enough information about assessment participation options to be able to make informed decisions with a student.

In the past, assessment participation guidelines in several states maintained that students who were not working toward district or state standards should not participate in general district or state assessments; these students were likely candidates for alternate assessments. As we learn more about how *all* students can work toward the same standards, participation decisions in many states are no longer based on such statements as, "Student is not working toward state standards," or "Student has a different curriculum." Students may be showing what they have learned in different ways, and they may be working on different skills at different levels of competence, but the standards should provide the target toward which all students progress.

The question IEP teams need to ask is, "Can this student show what he or she knows on paper-and-pencil tests when given accommodations?" If the answer is no, even with the accommodations the student is accustomed to using, then participation in alternate assessments would be a likely choice. Notice that the question is not, "Can the student do well on the test?" There are students who may not perform well, even with accommodations that they are accustomed to

using. When this concern arises (and it will), go back to the purpose of the test. The purpose of this type of assessment is to see how all the students at a particular grade level are progressing toward standards. It is important to see who is doing well and who is not, so that programmatic and budgetary adjustments can be made. Figure 1 shows a practical assessment participation decision process. Decisions about the accommodations a student will need are also a challenge for many IEP teams. The challenge is due, in part, to not having considered accommodations in the classroom. Thus, asking questions like those presented in Figure 1 is a helpful first step. As decisions in the classroom improve, this aspect of assessment decision making should also improve.

Figure 1. Participation Decision-Making Process


Is the student working toward challenging academic content standards?
If no, adjust the student's instruction so that he or she is working toward challenging academic content standards.
If yes, go on to the next question.
Can the student show what he or she knows on a general assessment, using accommodations?
If no, consider alternate assessment participation for the student.
If yes, the student should participate in the general assessment with a careful plan for the use of accommodations.

Consequences of Including Students With Disabilities in State and District Assessments

When NCEO asked state directors to tell us about the consequences of including students with disabilities in standards, assessments, and accountability systems, they were overwhelmingly positive in their responses (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001). Here are some of the positive consequences identified by state special education directors:

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- "Teachers of students with disabilities report becoming more involved in local general education initiatives to improve instruction in the standards."
- "Some students with disabilities report feeling more involved in general education activities."
- "Parents and special educators support raising the level of expectations for students with disabilities."
- "Students in special education are getting more rigorous curriculum and the standards are effecting change in instruction."
- "Many people have expressed that they are pleased that 'all means all.'"
- "Students are being taught more challenging material based on state standards, since teachers have been given resources to 'extend' the standards."
- "The performance of students with disabilities on some state assessments is improving."

At the local level, teachers, counselors, school administrators, and others have also reported several positive consequences of inclusion in state and district assessments. Here are some comments heard from IEP team members (Thompson, Quenemoen, et al., 2001):

- "Teachers of students with significant disabilities see themselves as professionals—not babysitters once they realize that their students can reach much higher expectations than in the past. Standards are good for kids!"
- "I think in our school, for the first time, these students are seen as who they really are, individuals with a unique personality. This happened as soon as more of the staff and community became involved with them through standards-based instruction and assessment."
- "Standards and assessments bring together the best skills of both general and special educators."
- "Alignment between instruction and assessment is increased with alternate assessment."
- "Assessment ensures that students are represented in the school accountability system, and that's important to getting noticed on our improvement committee."

Nothing new comes without cost, however, and there have been plenty of challenges as students with disabilities are included in

standards, assessments, and accountability systems. Here are some of the challenges identified by state directors (Thompson & Thurlow, 2001):

- "Some school district administrators are concerned that including scores of students with disabilities will lower their overall district scores, and consequently, their district ratings."
- "Some schools that have a disproportionate number of students with disabilities attending their school building feel the accountability system that considers the performance of all students enrolled is not fair."
- "Some people question how students with disabilities can access or reach the state learning standards."
- "Some teachers have observed a negative effect to the self-esteem of students with disabilities who were not able to respond to many questions on the state assessment."
- "Some administrators are not abiding by the requirements regarding accommodations and modifications because of the time and paperwork required. It's hard to set up so many testing circumstances."
- "Parents are concerned that their children won't graduate."

The last comment is a concern expressed by parents, students, and educators nationwide. Currently, at least 20 states use their large-scale assessments as a requirement for graduation from high school (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 1999). Students who do not reach a certain score or performance level, or who participate in alternate assessments, may not be eligible for a regular high school diploma. In some states, these students would receive a special education diploma, or some type of certificate of attendance or completion. This may have implications for college entrance or potential employment. In the elementary and middle school grades, not reaching a certain score on grade-level benchmark assessments may require students to repeat a grade or attend summer school (Quenemoen, Lehr, Thurlow, Thompson, & Bolt, 2000). Each state's requirements are different, but generally the stakes for receipt of a high school diploma are increasing. It is important for students to understand the purpose of each assessment they take and the consequences of the scores.

Summary

The shift to standards-based reform is challenging for everyone. Development of inclusive assessment systems to measure progress toward standards is part of that challenge. Overall, state data show a trend toward more inclusive participation and improved performance on state assessments by students with disabilities. As you work with IEP teams on the participation of students with disabilities in state and district assessments, become familiar with the standards, assessment guidelines, accommodations, and alternate assessments in your own state. Most state education agency websites contain basic information about the state standards and assessments, and most states and districts provide ongoing training. It is important to understand your state's approach thoroughly to be able to include effectively in state and district assessments all the students you serve.

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